

VZCZCXYZ0010
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHFR #6177/01 2571332
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 141332Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1330
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0894

C O N F I D E N T I A L PARIS 006177

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [MARR](#) [PINS](#) [ER](#) [ET](#) [SO](#) [DJ](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: FRANCE/DJIBOUTI: AMBASSADOR SYMINGTON'S PARIS
CONSULTATIONS

REF: PARIS 553

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: GOF officials at the MFA, President's office, and MOD were uniformly supportive of close and cooperative U.S.-France policies on Djibouti during their September 7-8 meetings with U.S. Ambassador to Djibouti W. Stuart Symington. They welcomed U.S. engagement in Djibouti, despite the potential for Djibouti's leveraging France and the U.S. against each other with respect to basing fees. French assistance to Djibouti amounts to 25 million euros/year, with an additional 30 million euros/year in base fees, a large sum on a per capita basis. The French expressed concern about the increasing influence of radical Islam in Djibouti and the region and suggested working with the U.S. to counter this trend.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY CONT'D: The lack of a modern legal system and business laws meeting international standards impedes economic growth and discourage investor confidence, French contacts stated. Djibouti's economy was based on its port; the French saw few other possibilities for immediate economic growth and job creation but agreed that fishing, tourism, and thermal energy could provide opportunities over the long term, if preceded by infrastructure improvements. Developments in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia have a large impact on Djibouti, which is in turn an excellent point for observing those countries. France continues to place high value on its military presence in Djibouti, which allows France to cover a broad swathe of Africa, the Middle East, and Indian Ocean. France is trying to align its forces in Africa to support Africa's sub-regional organization (but not at the cost of its bilateral military relations). The Borrel case remains an irritant to relations with Djibouti, with France's independent judiciary continuing to pursue a case that to several of Ambassador Symington's interlocutors was not worth the effort. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (C) U.S. Ambassador to Djibouti W. Stuart Symington on September 7 and 8 met with MFA DAS-equivalent Helene Le Gal and desk officer Francois Gautier; President Chirac's Africa Advisor Michel de Bonnecorse and his deputy Jacques Champagne de Labriolle; a roundtable of French military officers covering Djibouti and the Horn of Africa region; and Major General Benoit Puga, Commander of France's Special Operations.

¶4. (C) At each meeting, Ambassador Symington expressed his intention to strengthen U.S.-France cooperation on Djibouti, which he and his interlocutors considered already quite good. He said that his three priorities as he began his mission were to: (1) ensure continued close cooperation with Djibouti, France, and other allies on security-related issues; (2) exploit Djibouti's strategic location and its

unique status as a "crossroads" of regional activity in order to promote regional stability; and (3) promote economic growth and job creation. He welcomed French advice and insights and said he hoped to work closely with the French once in Djibouti. The French were receptive to Ambassador Symington's pledge to cooperate and expressed their intention to reciprocate.

Meeting at MFA

15. (C) After mentioning the Borrel case (see paras 17-18), DAS-equivalent Le Gal and desk officer Gautier began by noting that Djiboutian officials frequently visited France, often privately. On an official basis, President Guelleh visited Paris in May 2005, PM de Villepin stopped in Djibouti in February 2006, and FM Dileita intended to visit France later in September. French assistance to Djibouti (about 25 million euros/year) was high on a per capita basis. Base fees amounted to another 30 million euros/year. Le Gal welcomed U.S. interest in Djibouti -- "we do not seek a monopoly there" -- and stressed that the U.S. and France were not "rivals." Ambassador Symington said that he shared this view completely.

16. (C) Gautier said that French forces in Djibouti numbered somewhat under 3,000. He noted Djibouti's desire to renegotiate base fees with France after the U.S. established its base. He and Le Gal acknowledged that Djibouti would try to play France off against the U.S. on this and other issues, but they said that France accepted that reality. "It's OK if they have more friends," Le Gal noted, and remarked that France was the only EU country with an embassy in Djibouti. Gautier noted recent GOF efforts to restructure France's military presence in Africa to function on a regional basis and to realign those forces consistent with Africa's

sub-regional groupings.

17. (C) The MFA officials agreed with Ambassador Symington that more and more investors from other regions (e.g., Singapore and Dubai) were doing business in Djibouti, the reason being Djibouti's port and the access it provided to neighboring countries, especially Ethiopia. Le Gal agreed with Ambassador Symington's comments on Djibouti's serving as a platform for observing the region, adding that the Djiboutian government was a good source of information about Djibouti's neighbors. She noted the presence of Somalis in Djibouti and Djibouti's contacts with Somalia's Islamic Courts. France's embassy in Djibouti had been instructed to meet with moderate elements of the Islamic Courts, in the hope that the moderates, rather than the radicals, would gain dominance. Le Gal noted that Djibouti was also useful in following the Somaliland issue. Djibouti had managed to maintain a balanced relationship with Ethiopia and Eritrea.

18. (C) The French noted that the possibility of social unrest existed in Djibouti, in part because income from the bases was not necessarily being distributed broadly. The labor movement was relatively strong in Djibouti because of the port and labor unions consisting of dockworkers. Gautier commented that the political opposition lacked strong leadership. The widespread use of khat, a stimulant imported mainly from Ethiopia, was a significant factor in Djiboutian society. It had generally negative effects on the political process and economy. Social unrest was always possible when supplies of khat dwindled.

19. (C) Ambassador Symington solicited views on job creation, perhaps linked to the port, the railroad, related service, tourism, and the fishing industry. The French said that Djibouti's port remained the central element of its economy. Some wanted to make Djibouti a regional hub. However, obstacles to growth and investor confidence existed -- a weak legal system with business laws not conforming with international norms, which "thwarted ambition." Yemen provided certain services to the fishing industry. Djibouti offered possibilities regarding thermal energy, which had not yet been studied closely, Gautier said. A number of French

companies operated in Djibouti -- BNP, Total, France Telecom -- but these were small operations with "three expats" at each company. The EU was engaged in renovating Djibouti's railway system but this project would take time.

Meeting at French Presidency

¶10. (C) President Chirac's Africa advisor de Bonnecorse and his deputy Labriolle expressed concern about Islam's growing influence in Djibouti, which they described as "not completely African," with increasing ties to the Arab world. Bonnecorse stressed the need for Djibouti to work more closely with the West. Increasing numbers of Somalis, Eritreans, and Ethiopians were in Djibouti, attracted by Djibouti's port and the illusion that it would always provide more jobs, which was not the case. Ethnic tensions were growing in Djibouti.

¶11. (C) Bonnecorse said that France welcomed the U.S. military presence in Djibouti. He encouraged close cooperation with France's military and diplomatic representatives in Djibouti. On the economic side, construction of an oil refinery could provide opportunities. Tourism offered limited opportunities. Truck drivers, seeking to protect their status, were a threat to the railway system and hindered its renovation. Labriolle was more positive than his MFA colleagues on thermal energy, noting that an Italian company had been involved during the 1970s and that interest could revive with higher oil prices. On the fishing industry, Labriolle said that beyond catching fish, it was important to have a processing capability and qualified workforce, which Djibouti lacked. Ambassador Symington underscored the importance of sustainable management of fisheries resources and the potential for that effort to encourage sub-regional cooperation. Labriolle added that the French and U.S. military presence in Djibouti operated in Djibouti's favor economically by enhancing stability, which was not the case in places such as Yemen.

¶12. (C) On areas of U.S.-France cooperation, Bonnecorse stressed the need to work with President Guelleh ("who holds 99 percent of the power") in the context of discouraging the rise of radical Islam. Guelleh only looked at short-term issues -- wealth and power -- but needed to consider long-term perspectives. Bonnecorse said he knew Guelleh because of his periodic 2-3 day visits to Paris, during which he sometimes meets with Chirac. Bonnecorse described Guelleh as an agreeable personality but a bit of a "character," with

a bad temper when suspicious. Guelleh did not trust Westerners. In contrast, Bonnecorse had favorable impressions of Djibouti's Prime and Foreign Ministers. He warned Ambassador Symington to beware of Minister of Presidential Affairs Moussa.

¶13. (C) On ethnic issues, Labriolle said that, despite problems, a relative balance existed between the Issa and Afar. Unfortunately, disputes and conflicts always had an ethnic component, exacerbated by the influx of Somalis, Eritreans, Ethiopians, and others, which threatened the Afar more than it did the Issa. On the positive side, this mix and Djibouti's location allowed Djiboutians to know the region very well, Labriolle said.

¶14. (C) Labriolle suggested that Ambassador Symington work with the French to track developments in Somaliland and to determine Djiboutian attitudes towards it. The question of an independent Somaliland was likely to arise, Bonnecorse said, with the UK supportive. It was not an issue for France at present, but would become one.

¶15. (C) The Ethiopia-Eritrea dispute was a much more serious matter, Bonnecorse said, and it was imperative that the two sides respect the Algiers Agreement. The risk of war remained high and the regime in Eritrea was erratic. Djibouti followed the issue closely, was active diplomatically, and was concerned about its own border issues with Ethiopia. France was trying to improve its own

relations with Eritrea, including a ship visit and a planned visit later in September by Minister-Delegate for Cooperation, Development, and Francophonie Brigitte Girardin. Labriolle said that crime against Westerners in Eritrea was rising, a sign of possible increased instability.

¶16. (C) The French noted Djibouti's good relations with Iran, a possible source of cheap oil, which Djibouti once received from Saudi Arabia but no longer did. Relations with Iran also served to "warn" the West that Djibouti had alternatives to the West. Djibouti's relationship with Iran was consistent with the desire of small nations to seek as many friends as possible.

Borrel Case

¶17. (C) DAS-equivalent Le Gal began the MFA meeting by referring to the Borrel case and its continuing complications. (NOTE: The case involves the death of French magistrate Bernard Borrel in Djibouti in 1995, first ruled a suicide. Mrs. Borrel has been contesting the ruling, claiming that he was the victim of foul play. French judicial authorities have asserted their independence in the case and have refused to provide their files to Djibouti, despite an MFA public statement that the GOF would do so. Litigation continues at the International Court of Justice. See Ref A. END NOTE.) Le Gal said that the French have tried, with only limited success, to convince Djiboutians that the GOF's ability to control the French judiciary was limited because of the separation of powers, a principle the judiciary aggressively defended. She described the case as a continuing irritant that flared up from time to time and negatively affected relations.

¶18. (C) Presidential Advisor de Bonnecorse and his deputy Labriolle were much blunter, suggesting that the case was an entirely "franco-francais" waste of time and resources. They both firmly believed that the death was a suicide, citing evidence supporting such a finding (the decedent's note to his wife, instructions on the sale of his collection of military medals, liquidation of a bank account, and his purchase of a jerrycan of gasoline shortly before his immolated body was discovered). They regretted that the incident continued to affect relations but noted that cases entering the French judicial system often took on a life of their own, however unwarranted.

Meeting with Joint Staff

¶19. (C) Colonel Gerard Dubois (Africa and Middle East Advisor to the CHOD), Colonel Bernard Friedling (Chief Africa Branch, Joint Operations Center), Lieutenant Colonel Benoit Clement (Africa Division, International Relations Directorate, Joint Staff), and other staff hosted a roundtable meeting for Ambassador Symington. Clement reviewed French deployments in Africa (about 16,000 troops, including Operation Licorne in Cote d'Ivoire, 26 attaches in sub-Saharan Africa, and 300 military "cooperants" working across Africa). He described the importance of France's African presence in support of such operations as Task Force 150, engaged in anti-terrorism maritime patrols. The French

discussed the piracy issue and the pirates' relatively skilled way of darting between national and international waters to avoid capture.

¶20. (C) The officers expressed optimism despite Africa's crises. Its resources were attracting many non-Africans, although crises often seemed to erupt in resource-rich areas. They reviewed France's on-going military restructuring in Africa so as to align French forces and command structures with Africa's sub-regional organizations. This realignment would not, however, detract from France's bilateral military relationships, they stressed. France's military presence in

Africa had gone through three stages -- a phase of "assistance" during the immediate post-colonial period, then "cooperation" during the 1970s and into the 1990s, and then

"partnership" since the end of the 1990s. Worrisome areas of uncertainty included the directions that Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea would take and how this would affect Djibouti. Would Somalia come under radical Islam's domination? How would Eritrea react? Would IGAD, which so far had performed less than impressively, mature and increase its effectiveness as a regional player? The French indicated they would try to help IGAD become more effective.

¶21. (C) The French officers welcomed cooperation with the U.S. and others, emphasizing that France and the U.S. were not in competition in Africa. U.S.-France cooperation in Djibouti was excellent. The French mentioned renewed U.S.-France evacuation planning from Djibouti as one area of possible cooperation. Prior planning had gone dormant and should be reinvigorated, they believed. In Djibouti, the two sides worked well on search and rescue programs.

¶22. (C) The French were less optimistic about economic growth and job prospects, noting Djibouti's barren terrain. Its coastal areas offered potential but lacked infrastructure, and Djiboutians did not seem focused on exploiting the country's maritime economic potential.

Meeting with Major General Benoit Puga

¶23. (C) Major General Puga, Commander of Special Operations, stressed the importance of Djibouti for its strategic position between the Arab world and Africa. French forces there focused on the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean, but also used Djibouti as a projection platform for the rest of Africa and Central Asia. He noted that close cooperation with the U.S. existed and remained important. He said the French were confident that the Djiboutian government had good knowledge of in-country developments and that the Djiboutians regarded the terrorist threat as low. An incident could happen, however, but the Djiboutians thought the local police and intelligence services were on top of things.

¶24. (C) French forces in Djibouti were important forward-deployed forces. Puga believed that the ability to respond quickly to crises with a small force was often better than waiting too long to build up a large force and then arriving after a small fire became a big one. French forces were following the situation in Somalia and shared information with the U.S. France had no contacts with the Islamic government. Unlike Afghanistan, there was no evidence of terrorist training camps in Somalia, although Puga said individual terrorists might be present and believed that Somalia might be used as a transit point or refuge for terrorists on the run. Arms and drug trafficking were concerns. He concluded that Somalia was a worry for the medium term.

¶25. (C) Puga said that French forces were cooperating with Yemen and had helped to train Yemen's Special Forces over the past two years. The trainers were not a permanent presence but worked in Yemen on a periodic basis. The French were following the Ethiopia-Eritrea crisis and tried to promote equilibrium. France was perhaps more worried about a possible spillover of the crisis and its effect on Djibouti. He said that France's military interest included making sure that France had an evacuation plan in place. Puga mentioned in passing the difficulties in working with Eritrea. Puga said that a French general officer was stationed in Addis Ababa to work with the African Union. The AU was not yet a mature, effective organization, but France would be patient and would remain engaged in helping it succeed.

¶26. (U) Ambassador Symington has cleared this message.

Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:

<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>
STAPLETON